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Vershina as an Open-Air Museum of Polish Musical Culture in Siberia

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1. Introduction

This chapter analyses how the inhabitants of Vershina, a small Siberian village located approximately 130 km north of the federal province (rajon) of Irkutsk Oblast, Russian Federation, retains a strong Polish character (Figure 1). The village was founded by Polish voluntary immigrants about a century ago and now more than five hundred people of Polish origin live there. They continue to speak the Polish language and maintain a vast Polish musical repertoire. Due to the preserved Polishness, Vershina has become a popular tourist attraction in recent years. The village's unique national and cultural identity has been created, preserved, and represented by the musical events which are a must in the program offered to the mostly Polish tourists. The strategies Vershinians employ *vis-a-vis* foreign audiences and tourist agencies influence musical practice and everyday life. Special attention will be paid, therefore, to how the musicians change their performances depending upon the context.



Figure 1 View of the main street in Vershina (Photo by the author, September, 2006)

Despite changes taking place in connection with growing tourism, the musical practice of a given community need not be limited to performances for tourists. Musical traditions can coexist in parallel to one another within various contexts. I will thus also consider shifts in meaning in the case of similar performances at religious or secular events without the participation of tourists, as well as with their involvement. I will not treat the changes simply as symptomatic of devastating impact on a centuries-long tradition, but examine rather how these traditions have been transformed by political and commercial forces.

2. Research Sources

This research relies on my fieldwork in Siberia in 2006 and on the contributions of Łukasz Smoluch who travelled to Vershina in 2011, as well as on virtual fieldwork (Cooley, Meizel and Sayed 2008), which I have continued to conduct. My study is oriented not towards music exclusively as such, but as a process created, performed, and listened to by human beings.

First-hand knowledge of the studied reality facilitated the interpretation of data obtained through the Internet. Especially useful were videos and films uploaded on YouTube by visitors to Vershina. Vershinians themselves do not publish material on websites, perhaps due to the difficulties of Internet access (and only a recent introduction of cell phone coverage in the village). We can observe their everyday life through the lens of tourists' video cameras, as well as on Facebook, where the account Wierszyna—“Mała Polska” na Syberii (Vershina—The “Little Poland” in Siberia), URL: <https://www.facebook.com/WierszynamalaPolskaNaSyberii>, was created last year and managed by Polish compatriots from the regional association “Forum dla Zagłębia Dąbrowskiego” (Forum for the Dąbrowski Basin) located in Sosnowiec, Poland.

3. Theoretical Framework

Ethnomusicological interest in relations between tourism and music began in the 1980s. Its initial manifestations included conferences organised by the International Council for Traditional Music in Jamaica (1986) and in Schladming (1989), crowned by the publishing of their proceedings (Kaeppler and Levin 1988; Suppan 1991). Subsequent publications that continued discussions on the subject were articles in *The World of Music* from 1999, as well as books that included Cooley (2005) and Gibson and Connell (2005). One of the main issues raised in these works is that of authenticity, a factor which has the capacity to draw tourists from great distances.

The concept of “authenticity” appears in works referring to various forms of tourism, and is key in deliberations on the subject of the production and consumption of music. As researchers have remarked, tourists generally wish to believe that the music presented to them is original and true, and not subject to manipulation. They confer meanings to musical performances, often creating myths of a tradition in decline. The category of “authenticity” does not refer exclusively to musical authorship, but is also

tied to a specific place. Great meaning is ascribed to the “roots” of the music with a defined localization. Such a place becomes known as “authentic,” in which the “magic” of the past does its work. When seeking “authentic” places and cultures, tourists expect to have experiences distinct from the everyday. In consequence, authenticity becomes commodified and created as a tourist attraction, supplying entertainment or strengthening the impression of a sense of “difference” and a “flight” from the artificial.” Authenticity does not exist independently from the human being, but is a social construct. It is often, therefore, an illusion, conceived by tourists as something they perceive as distant from commercialisation (Gibson and Connell 2005: 138).

Although change in music constitutes a necessary element of creativity, it is generally not welcomed by tourists, whose reason for visiting is to hear “authentic” pieces. They prefer known versions of songs which they associate with the past. Hence, the communities they visit attempt in their own interest to give the tourists what the latter seem to expect. The participants in musical performances addressed to tourists become actors whose behaviours are constructed by an imagined view of what tourists want to see and hear. In cases where the tourists are interested in performances they associate with their own ethnic or national traditions, the performers put on clothes appropriate to this view, recreate old rituals—not necessarily tied with the local tradition—and perform music that fits the listeners’ tastes. By the same token, they provoke a tourist invasion of their own culture, which then begins to undergo a homogenisation (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984: 346).

An analysis of contemporary meanings of musical repertoire performed by the Vershina inhabitants must consider various levels of their functioning. The focus here is less on the product, i.e. musical sound, and more on the experience of music making, or the processes influencing human behaviour. Research into these processes will be prioritised over the repertoire’s character and categorisation of songs. I am particularly interested in the differences in musical performances of Vershinians having to do with repertoire, venues, public participation, costumes, and stage design. Practices connected with the enumerated elements build something that Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms a “display interface.” According to this concept, the meaning of a musical performance results not from what is performed, but from how a show is detached and re-contextualised in a heritage production for tourists (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 8).

Some explanation is required of the concept of heritage, often tied with that of “authenticity.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, author of the article “Theorizing Heritage,” defines it as the “transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995: 369). According to her, heritage is a modality of contemporary cultural production tied to references to the past and meant to constitute a special value of the work’s effects. Values are added to cultural forms that are presented, transmitted, and introduced onto the market by supplying them with labels such as “regional product,” “historical recreation,” “cultural conservation,” and “national heritage.” The attribute of the past conferred onto cultural products evokes in tourists a sense of a real distance they are able to cross, setting out on a voyage to places where they will find “authentic” cultural products representing a heritage lost in their daily

surroundings. The instruments serving to confer the marks of authenticity to the mentioned products—i.e. the interface between “tradition” and tourism—have as their goal the presentation of a heritage produced as if their connections with the past were alive. They consist of museum exhibits, historical villages, and concerts for tourists, which are cultural forms governed by their own laws and constituting immense generators of meaning. Heritage thus means the performance of what is local with export in mind, and its attribute is virtuality, regardless whether in the case of the studied community we are dealing with a preservation of tradition, or a break in its continuation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 8). This conception shows that tourism and heritage work in combination with one another. The supposed presence of “heritage” makes places into travel destinations and museums of themselves.

In connection with tourism being a symbolic action that transports people physically and socially to places of memory and/or performances associated with entertainment, the performance of Vershinians addressed to tourists can be evaluated with Cooley’s model, which describes tourist festivals in Zakopane, Poland, as types of rituals. This is because the festivals constitute something extraordinary that finds itself beyond the sphere of everyday activity. They are full of symbols and actions used by the village inhabitants to define their own place in a changing world. Participants in such events and their relation to nature are subject during the meeting to a type of transformation, similar to the case of traditional calendrical rituals (Cooley 1999: 31). Many performances with tourist participation refer to the past, but through placement in a new context they both maintain cultural forms and cause their transformation. In other words, the musicians may re-invent music for such occasions and imbue it with life in the very act of performance.

To understand the nature of power relations in connection to musical performance roles in the multicultural Vershinian community, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and polyphony may be useful.¹⁾ While studying Dostoevsky’s novels, Bakhtin, the Russian literary researcher and art theorist, stated that dialogue assumed a central place in human existence. “To be means to communicate dialogically”, says Bakhtin (Bakhtin 2003: 252). Never ending dialogue adds meaning to human life in every moment. Dialogue is seen by Bakhtin as something more than just conversation of two or more people. Other forms of consciousness, ideas, and people are equal partners for the “I”, and any given person. Seeing the identity of others is a way of seeing his/her own self. In other words, voices taking part in conversation are polyphonic as they represent various styles, beliefs and opinions. An utterance is not only an abstract utterance devoid of context. Its meaning is shaped in relation to the utterances of other people, to the world that exists in time and space (Bakhtin 2004: 71). The performance of music is among the many forms of questioning one’s ethnicity and nationality, religion, body, and social status reflexively. The performers and receivers—the latter being guests visiting Vershina in the case at hand—search for these replies, intently listening to each other’s voices.

4. The Research Population and its History

The inhabitants of Vershina are the descendants of immigrants who came from Lesser Poland and the Dąbrowski Basin (southern Poland). They came to Siberia around 1910, in connection with the Stolypin agricultural reforms²⁾, which made it possible to set up agricultural farms on sparsely populated lands. The immigrants were mainly farmers and miners who fled the difficult conditions of life in Poland and hoped for a better life in Siberia. The reality, however, was brutal. They spent the first winter in dugouts created in riverbanks, and had to make land possible for cultivation by clearing the forest. The Russian authorities nevertheless were favourable to the settlers' attempts to maintain their Polishness. In 1912, a Polish school with three classes was opened in Vershina, and in 1915, a newly built Roman Catholic church was consecrated where Masses were celebrated by a priest who travelled from Irkutsk.

The authorities' treatment of the Polish immigrants changed diametrically when the Soviet Union was created; education in Polish was cancelled, the church was shut down, and all religious practices were banned. The apex of persecution came in 1937, when the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR (NKVD), shipped out and shot thirty of the village's most respected residents. This caused a panic in the local population. The atmosphere of terror intensified when kolkhozes were activated and all private land possessions had to be given up under the threat of reprisals. For many years, Vershina's contacts with Poland were suspended. This situation did not change until Perestroika, i.e. from the second half of the 1980s.

Despite the oppression of Soviet rule, Vershinians maintained a strong sense of community and connection to tradition. They retained their original language (a mixture of Silesian and Lesser-Poland dialect), their ancestral religion, i.e. Catholicism, which they saw as a symbol of national belonging as well as a part of the musical repertoire brought from Poland. As for the preservation of the Polish language, Vershina is exceptional among other communities in Siberia inhabited by a population with Polish roots. To this day, a vast majority of Vershinians use Polish in daily speech. Presently, there functions in the village a three-grade primary school, where children learn the Polish language, as well as Polish songs and dance; moreover, a Polish Roman Catholic parish has been reactivated. In 2002, the Polish diaspora organization Wis'a (Vistula) was established in the village to maintain the knowledge of Polish language and Polish national traditions, collaborate with Polish diaspora organizations from other regions of the Russian Federation, as well as foster relations with compatriots in Poland. The activities of Wis'a receive financial and other aid from the Polish Consulate in Irkutsk, the Ogniwo (Link) Polish Autonomy in Irkutsk, and other Polish institutions, among them the Polish Community (Wspólnota Polska). In 2003, Dom Polski (Polish Cultural House) was organized in Vershina, with a common room, library, memorial hall, folk ensemble rehearsal space, tourist rooming house, and location for meetings of various degrees of formality with visitors. The village showcase, Jarzumbek,³⁾ is a vocal-instrumental ensemble founded in 1986 by the local kolkhoz directorship concerned about the disappearance of Polish traditions (Figure 2). They perform for visiting tourists



Figure 2 Jarzumbek Ensemble (Photo by the author, September 2006)

and at entertainment events where other ensembles from Siberia participate. To this day, the ensemble is led by a Russian couple, Kachietov.

Since the 1990s, the village is frequently visited by guests from Poland: clients of tourist agencies of different gender and age, groups making pilgrimages, as well as youths travelling on their own (to whom Verzhina is a necessary stop on a trip to Lake Baikal), official delegates of Polish political and community organizations, as well as researchers representing various disciplines: ethnologists, folklorists, sociologists, and historians, both Polish and Russian. We as well, i.e. the participants of the above-mentioned ethnomusicological expedition, have been put under the same umbrella by Verzhinians.⁴⁾

Thus, despite its physical isolation, Verzhina has become a target travel destination for Poles. All arriving guests expect to find the “authentic” Polish culture in Verzhina, a kind of “time travel” to their own roots, and to hear traditional songs long forgotten in Poland.

5. Dialogues of Verzhinians

Understanding the strategies employed by Verzhinians vis-à-vis outside visitors necessitates an analysis of the polyphonic discourses they undertake, and which unfold on various levels: the national, regional, and local. Official performances for tourists and for the local establishment did not cause the participatory tradition that existed earlier in the community to disappear. On the contrary, this sphere of performance practice remains alive in neighbourhood contexts. It also continues in the tourist shows, although its meaning for this audience has shifted.

Although the Verzhinians’ Polish ancestors left their country before 1918, i.e. before the rebirth of the Polish state, and came from various locations, they became connected

through a cultural union, strongly felt in the face of Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, and Buriats living around them. The politics of Bolshevik rule sought to stultify this group's voice, and only after Perestroika did it become an equal one in the "choir" of Siberia's pluralistic society. Vershinians interact with neighbouring groups by participating in their cultural life and enticing them to similarly participate in theirs. A testimony to this is the presence of individuals of non-Polish origin in the folk ensemble Jarzumbek, as well as the inclusion of Russian songs in the group's repertoire, mostly due to younger members.

Although the events for tourists are not homogeneous in terms of particular goals set out by Vershinians, the overarching goal remains a reaffirmation of their specific national and regional identity. Performing with representatives of neighbouring groups when the public is made up of guests from Poland, Vershinians want to show both what they share with other groups living in Siberia, as well as their distinct identity. They perform songs in part generally known by their neighbours, as well as make references to their own individual tradition through the use of eloquent physical symbols such as dress, spoken dialect, ritualized behaviours, music, and dance, among other elements. We can thus talk about a shared sense of a national and regional identity. Vershinians and their neighbours all consider themselves Siberians.

Dialogue between these groups was observed during the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Jarzumbek ensemble, which took place in September 2011. On the occasion of this jubilee, ensemble members in collaboration with the Polish diaspora organisation Vistula organised a benefit event, to which they also invited guests from outside Vershina, including Poland. Presented in Polish, the artistic programme included poems and patriotic songs associated with the national tradition, as well as folk songs, the staging of a harvest festival ceremony, and a pop song from the repertoire of a popular Polish female singer, Maryla Rodowicz. Representatives of other ethnic groups living in the neighbouring villages—Russians, Tatars, and Buryats—also took the microphone. At the reception that followed the concert, artistes, guests, and members of the public participated in the singing of Polish and Russian songs, while participatory dancing was accompanied by Russian music and world hits reproduced from records (Smoluch 2013: 63–65).

The varied repertoire presented by Vershinians at a celebration of their holiday constitutes a reflection of their complex identity, formed through dialogue with other Siberians, consulate employees, priests, and guests from Poland. The choice of songs presented on the stage was undoubtedly influenced by the audience. Because it included people of various nationalities, ethnic groups, and social status, the decision was made to present a repertoire tied to various Polish cultural regions. In the repertoire, the past, present, and future became intertwined in a dynamic interaction that occurred between tradition and innovation. These various voices of Vershinians were sounded in a polyphonic choir, created together with their neighbours: Russians, Buryats, and Tatars. Each group offered a staged version of their "heritage."

In their own social company, Vershinians perform a repertoire in both Polish and Russian languages. In contrast to Russian songs, they call the Polish repertoire *nasze spiwki* (our little songs), which come from various sources such as the village dwellers'

memories, songbooks, and audiovisual carriers brought by travellers from Poland. Characteristically, musical pieces imported from Poland—folk, patriotic and popular songs—begin to immediately function in traditional, oral transmission in Vershina. The largest part of the Polish repertoire however, consists of folksongs from the times of migration which bear no influence of Russian music, including wedding, love, soldier and mining songs as well as ballads. These all have a strophic structure and their melodies are usually based on a major-minor tonality. They clearly show an influence of the rhythms of Polish dances such as *krakowiak*, *mazur* or *polka*. They are all performed in part in the dialect of Poland's southern regions. Singing songs learned from their parents and grandparents, Vershinians have a sense that part of their identity remains unchanged. Owing precisely to them, they retain a palpable dialogue with the past as well as their local identity.

Worthy of attention is that during the 2006 and 2011 field research in Vershina, disappearance of the religious repertoire was nearly complete, caused by the anti-religious propaganda of the Soviets for many decades. Active only since Perestroika, the local church at the time attracted only a small group of believers. While interviewees described themselves as such, they did not feel a need to participate in the Holy Mass or other church services. Some of those questioned were unacquainted with both Christmas and Easter. Newly born babies were christened, but the dead were buried without a priest. The musical setting of church Mass was provided by an "automatic organist", a remote-control device for the reproduction of musical pieces played by the organist. Once weekly, the function of organist was fulfilled by a nun who travelled from Irkutsk.

In recent years, this situation has changed dramatically, as surmised from YouTube videos. Celebrations are now shown with believers singing religious songs accompanied by an organist appearing "live." Carol singing, i.e. the visiting of homes with greetings during Christmas time, singing carols during Christmas tree decoration, and other customs connected with this holiday and with Easter also take place. Such old, forgotten traditions have clearly received a new life, with Polish tourists to Vershina surely playing an important part.

6. Performances for Tourists as Rituals

Vershinians' welcoming rituals for tourists have in large part replaced similar practices from earlier times. They have a set script, in which musical performances take place at strictly defined moments, while the physical arrangement of the ritual space defines the relations between tourists and performers. YouTube videos with written commentary provided by travel participants show what music is performed during these meetings and on which occasions. The repertoire presented to tourists now clearly tends towards patriotic and religious songs popular today in Poland and other Polish diaspora communities, and performed during pilgrimages made to Pope John Paul II. It is probable that the priest appointed from Poland and present in Vershina for the last several years has contributed to the dissemination of this repertoire.

Poles travelling to Vershina are greeted on the community's borders with bread and salt by a village delegation and/or local officials and the parish priest, depending on the level and purpose of the visits. During the welcoming ceremony a melody from the pilgrimage repertoire with the repeating words "Alleluia, alleluia, we welcome you" is sung. The next stage of the meeting with the use of music takes place at the Polish Cultural House, where an official reception is held with "traditional" meals. Jarzumbek ensemble members in self-sewn folk dresses or street clothes either sit with everyone at the table and sing, or they sing standing against the wall on an imaginary stage, which gives rise to a clear division into the performers and the public. Their participation in the event is compulsory. Notably, what makes the meetings attractive to tourists is not necessarily the content of the Vershinians appearances, but the opportunity to share repertoire. While Jarzumbek performs a repertoire that is partly archaic, the Vershinians and their guests sing together songs with Polish texts.

The music performed by Vershinians for tourists is not generally folk music brought by the first immigrants from Poland, but corresponds to the visiting Poles' imagined musical heritage. Language plays a significant role in creating the heritage that the tourists seek. The Silesian dialect, for example, is seen by its speakers as a symbol of Silesian, and by the same token Polish identity of Vershinians. After all, the promotional campaigns of tourist agencies advertise the trip to Vershina as offering an insight into one's own roots. As can be inferred from the behaviour of Vershinians to the Polish visitors this imagined picture must be satisfied in order to maintain a significant basis for contacts with Poland. The appropriate presentation of Polish cultural elements to guests from Poland allows local residents to strengthen the sense that they also belong to the Polish community. One of my interlocutors named even the Silesian dialect in which Vershinians sing "a passport to Poland".

Tourists—even those particularly sensitised to the performed songs' "authenticity" — sometimes cannot distinguish proper traditional music from its modified forms, and also seem to not want to make the distinction. In one of the videos available on YouTube, scenes appear from a reception at the Polish Cultural House during which the Jarzumbek ensemble performs the song *Polskie Kwiaty* ("Polish Flowers"), with text and music by the nun Magdalena Ponichter (pseudonym: Magdalena Nazaretanka, i.e., Magdalene the Nazarethan). This text can be found in songbooks of patriotic songs, and the song itself has been performed by a well-known Polish singer, Justyna Steczkowska. In turn, a nostalgic video report from a trip says in part: "In Vershina we listened to a moving recital of Polish songs long forgotten here, at home, because who today still sings 'Kwiaty polskie'?' (sic)" The author of the quotation, N.B. employed at an artiste agency, evidently ascribed the song's text to the distinguished Polish poet Julian Tuwim, who wrote a poem of the same title, something that greatly magnified its perceived importance as an element of "authentic" national tradition.⁵⁾

7. Closing Remarks

In conclusion, we can state that the participation of tourists in musical events of Vershina

is usually an artificially manufactured interaction connected with the sampling of music popular in Polish *milieus*, within condensed presentations. Such samples are presented as museum pieces “frozen” in time, and juxtaposed with the surrounding, everyday reality of contemporary culture. Tourists unwittingly, however, through their participation may provoke changes in Vershinian musical culture. Their presence mobilises performers to uphold musical practices considered to be Polish heritage. These practices not only involve performances of those songs brought to Siberia by the first Polish settlers. The contemporary repertoire of Vershinians shows an increasing tendency towards hybridism which is a consequence of, among others, the inclusion of folk, patriotic, pilgrimage, and popular songs from the songbooks and recordings imported to Vershina by visitors from Poland on the one hand, and the desire to meet the expectations of guests coming to the village in search of “authenticity”, on the other. The new songs quickly become the subject of folklorisation and assume the shape of “new traditions”. While the old songs performed by Vershinians lost their ritual function even before the tourist invasion, many songs belonging to their current repertoire have been gaining such a function as an element of ritualised performances for visitors. Given the fact that the primary goal of Vershinians in contact with tourists is to confirm their national and regional identity, tourism can even be assessed positively. They perceive the presence of tourists as proof of their tradition’s authenticity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness. This is what they hear while listening to the “voices” (in Bakhtinian sense) of the travellers from Poland. However, the fact that shows for tourists often involve a nostalgic revisiting of the past, they not only conserve musical tradition, but also threaten its perpetuation.

Translated by Maximilian Kapelański

Notes

- 1) These concepts have recently drawn the attention of musicologists (Korsyn 1999; Middleton 2000; Hogan 2008; Lachmann 2011).
- 2) These reforms were introduced by Petr Stolypin, the head of the Council of Ministers of the Russian Empire, between 1906 and 1911 in an effort to deal with the ongoing agrarian problem. Under these reforms peasants were allowed to acquire their own land.
- 3) A name in dialect that comes from the word “jarząbek,” i.e. a small Sorbus.
- 4) The problem of similarities between tourism and ethnography was undertaken in secondary literature. Enumerated among these similarities were travels by ethnographers and tourists to foreign places, staying only a certain time, leading observations of the inhabitants, and reporting what has been observed (cf. Bruner 1995: 231–232).
- 5) Edyta Poźniak, Andrzej Gajcy, Tomasz Dawid Jędruchów, “Podróż do Wierszyny—Sybiracy.” (<http://www.m-d-m.pl/index.php?strona=syberia&id=1>). (accessed: 20 July 2014)

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